

The *Living* God!
Acts 14:8-20
August 17, 2008
Rev. Curtis J. Young

*The text of this sermon may be used without first obtaining my permission. I do ask, however, that if you use any portion of the message for teaching or preaching preparations, that you would e-mail me a brief note to say you are making use of it. This would be a courtesy and help to me personally. You will note that in some sermons sections are bracketed between two sets of three asterisks (***) . The purpose is to delineate material that I did not preach, but that is integral to understanding the theology or exegesis of what was preached. My e-mail address is revyoung@comcast.net – Rev. Curt Young)*

Here we have Paul preaching to a largely illiterate group of superstitious pagans. It is fair to ask: How does this speak to us and the world in which we live?

Fast forward three chapters to Acts 17 where Paul addresses a crowd of well educated Greeks in Athens, and we're far more comfortable with that scenario.

Even in its time, Lystra was a small town of little significance. The people were isolated; they spoke a local dialect. What remains of Lystra today is what can be dug from the ground.

The key to explaining why Paul picked Lystra may be the verb in verse 6. Luke says he "fled" there. Here was an out of the way place, a potential refuge where he might conduct his ministry.

Yet what an odd adventure awaited him! In fact the oddness of this story holds the key to its relevance for us. Let's consider the progression of events.

It begins with a remarkable healing of a man lame from birth. The crowd responds by proclaiming Paul and Barnabas are gods become men. Barnabas is the head god, Zeus! Paul the spokesman is Hermes, the messenger god.

Local priests bring bulls to offer in sacrifice to them. When through all the noise and confusion, Paul and Barnabas realize people want to worship them, they tear their clothes, and rush into the crowd: "Look, we're one of you, merely human."

Paul tries to explain: "We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things (idols) to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them."

Here's the part that makes this story so strange. The crowd still wanted to sacrifice to them as gods. "You're a god." "No, I'm not." "Yes, you are." "No, I'm not."

It would be a mistake to dismiss what happened as the irrational action of primitive people, as if we have nothing to learn from what happened. The only reason we aren't tempted to join them is that we listen to the word of God; they weren't.

There is a three word phrase on which Paul's message turns, in verse 15, "the living God." "We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God."

Paul draws the sharpest possible contrast between the gods the Lystrans served, and the living God.

But they didn't hear it. They don't hear the significance -- what makes "the living God" so different from their own. They don't challenge the claim that he is the creator, because it doesn't matter.

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To the superstitious, the kind of gods they honored was the only kind they knew. Three chapters later, to the more sophisticated crowd in Athens, it doesn't matter, either.

Think about this. For the superstitious the kind of gods they served was the only kind they knew. As verse 16 puts it, they had been allowed to go their own way.

But among their wise counterparts in Athens, the kind of gods they served was all there is. The issue was not that they didn't know anything else; rather, they were convinced there was nothing else.

For both the superstitious and cynical, gods were a practical matter, a matter of usefulness, not truth.

For the Lystrans offering sacrifices to Zeus and Hermes provided a measure of consolation, reassurance against their fears of nature and the impersonal nature of nature.

The sun can warm your cheek or burn it. The sun doesn't care. The rain can help your crops or destroy them. A storm has no conscience.

So to create some sense of security and comfort before the impersonal forces of nature, there was a sun god and rain god, as well as many others, who might be appeased.

For the Athenian elite, the gods served an even more useful purpose. They were a means to power, wealth, influence. They guaranteed loyalty to the city state. If Athena was the patron goddess of Athens, you don't want to mess with Athens, or Athena will mess with you. The reverse also was true: Don't mess with Athena or Athens will mess with you. Athena served to keep the powerful in power, the masses compliant, and the economy thriving.

We'll see an illustration of this at Ephesus where, what drove the locals to murderous fury was the economic recession that resulted from people coming to Christ. They were no longer buying the idols of Artemis that the silversmiths created. It had nothing to do with truth.

Whether the gods of the Greeks were real was beside the point. Faith was not about laying hold of ultimate reality.

Before Socrates in the fifth century BC, Greek philosophy began with the rejection of traditional mythological explanations for things. Pythagorus is a famous example. We will learn about Diogenes the cynic in a couple of weeks.

Why do I stress this? Because the outlook in our time is much the same. Western philosophy reduces every religion and faith in God to the level of superstition or exploitation – as a means of comfort or control.

I want to demonstrate this. In 1841, Ludwig Feuerbach published The Essence of Christianity. His thesis: God is a mere projection of our minds to make us feel better about our weaknesses. There is no true theology, or study of God, but only psychology, the study of man and how he deals with weakness and fear.

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Feuerbach deeply influenced Karl Marx who wrote that Christianity is a means of oppression. It keeps the powerful in power and slaves in their place. It minimizes the evils of oppression with promises of streets of gold later. It lulls the masses into complacency. "Religion," he wrote, "is the opiate of the people."

Friedrich Nietzsche agreed faith in God is about power, but in the opposite direction. Christianity is not a device of the rich to oppress the poor but a device of the weak to control the strong. "Love, humility, and justice" are a slave morality used to gain advantage over the powerful.

Lastly, Sigmund Freud who argued that all religion is a mental disorder, that God is destructive illusion to comfort us in the face of the merciless forces of nature.

What do these four views add up to? Confusion. Like Paul at Lystra, we face many who are unwilling or unable to hear, because they think they know better, because they're not going to be taken in.

To which we respond, you are right in this. The world has many false gods, just as many expressions of faith are smokescreens for evil or mere make believe to make us feel better.

But, who are you to say there is no God and no faith by which you may come to know him? Who are you to insist that on the greatest and most important matter of all, there is no truth so that evidence the contrary is inadmissible, and those who bring it are subversive?

In contrast to all the futile deities in this life, there is the living God -- Real, eternal, personal. Apart from knowing the truth about him we cannot know the truth about ourselves, for he made us in his image. He lives with or without us, but we cannot live without him. In him we live and move and have our being.

He is the creator of the heavens and the earth and sea and everything in them. You whose skepticism has reduced you to question whether you can know anything for certain, or whether there is anything real to know, still live in a world that is altogether real because God is real.

This creation testifies of him. It bears witness to his power and eternal nature, to his care even for those who deny him.

There is embedded within the creation an anthropic principle, from anthropos, referring to man. Not only are conditions on this planet fine tuned to accommodate our living and thriving here, but since the early 1970's, astrophysics tells us the entire universe is so fine tuned that we might exist within it. As one skeptic sheepishly put it, it is as if the universe were made for us.

There is embedded within the creation a complementary principle as well, the "theotic" principle, from theos, referring to God. This is a world which evokes within us feelings of awe, gratitude, humility. This is no sentimentality. It is stimulation for worship, to seek God, to reach out for him and perhaps find him though he is not far from any of us.

The living God, creator of the heavens and the earth, is not lifeless, and no mere projection of our need. If we long of him it is because he made us to long for him.

He has embedded a grand testimony within history as well as nature, in calling Israel to be his own. From their history, we learn so much more about "the living God."

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He is the God who speaks and it is done, who hears and answers, who knows and judges, who seeks and saves.

To the testimonies of the living God in creation and history, he has given us the testimony of himself in a man, Jesus the Lord.

The greatest revelation of God to us is the revelation of God in his Son. In calling us to place our faith in us, the benefits of consolation and power that typify false religion are turned on their head.

Instead of promising bliss, he warns those who would follow him of the costs and dangers, rebukes any claim to personal righteousness, and condemns all forms of self-seeking.

He demands his disciples forgive, insists on their compassion, calls them to love their enemies, and reject worldly power.

The center of his revelation was not his teaching but his crucifixion; his becoming our sin bearer, our suffering Savior, the very love of God for the God hater and the mercy of God for godless rebel. From this crucifixion, he rose from the dead.

The faith to which he calls us is faith in himself as our merciful Savior. The promise he makes is forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. Because he is the truth, and the life he gives is ultimate reality, we live now in him and have this life.

At the end of this account, Luke tells us that Paul was stoned, dragged from the city and left for dead. But he was not. As Christians gathered about him and prayed, he got up and went back into the city.

If the faith in Christ that Paul proclaimed had to do with power Paul would have accepted worship as a god as Herod did. If it had to do with comfort and safety, he would never have gone back in to Lystra.

No this faith once and for all time revealed to us is about truth and the living God.